

Conservapedia: problems, principles, mindset and implications for a polarized world

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Abstract

Purpose – In this article, I present an initial examination of Conservapedia; namely, the problems it identified in the Wikipedia project that made a split appear necessary and the principles it claims to follow. I then argue that Conservapedia is characterized by a “law-and-order” mindset. Finally, implications for the continued existence of Conservapedia in a polarized world are presented.

Design/methodology/approach – A content analysis of key Conservapedia documents was conducted.

Findings – The founders of Conservapedia took issue with Wikipedia over its supposed intolerance and inconsistency of thought. They developed a set of principles that attempted to reconcile open-mindedness with efficiency and an extreme point of view on certain subjects. Nevertheless, Conservapedia failed to produce a vibrant community, and its function today is more of a database of alt-right dogma controlled by a core group of supporters.

Originality/value – There has been little scholarly attention paid to the various offshoots of Wikipedia, including Conservapedia. This is unfortunate. These alternative wiki encyclopedias represent knowledge universes of their own and in an increasingly polarized world they are important phenomena to understand.

Keywords Conservapedia, Wikipedia, Encyclopedias, Alt-right movement, Political polarization, Hegemony

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There has been little scholarly attention paid to the various offshoots of Wikipedia, including Conservapedia. This is unfortunate. These alternative wiki encyclopedias represent knowledge universes of their own and in an increasingly polarized world, politically, economically and culturally, they are important phenomena to understand. In this article, I will present an initial examination of Conservapedia. First, I will outline the problems that its founders believed bedevilled Wikipedia and the principles that they claim Conservapedia follows. I will then provide evidence of what I call a “law and order” mentality in much Conservapedia discourse and argue that this mentality impeded its expansion, leaving it in the hands of a small core group of supporters. Finally, the implications of the Conservapedia project for an increasingly polarized world are taken up. In particular, I argue that Conservapedia is no longer a vibrant community of editors because its founder and core membership, in their quest for efficiency and adherence to a “law and order” mentality failed to either recognize or appreciate that conservatism, like liberalism, was not monolithic in its thinking. It involves a variety of strands of thought, some extreme and some moderate. In a way, Conservapedia is a distorted mirror of Wikipedia. Many influential editors on Wikipedia also hold notions that see their own points-of-view trumping others, and this too has resulted, over time, in a hardening of epistemological positions. Yet it is important to keep in mind that despite its lack of vibrancy, Conservapedia still plays a vital role in the knowledge ecosystem of the far-right or alt-right (Albright 2016). It serves as a database for the creation and dissemination of what Bures (2023) refers to a “discourse of adversaries” and Bar-On, a new hegemonic project with the ultimate aim of building conservative “ethno-states” (Bar-On, 2021). Understanding both Conservapedia and other related alternative online encyclopaedias should be an important task for LIS scholarship. I end with a call for those concerned about



these developments to engage in their own hegemonic knowledge projects, and suggest that one way forward would be to consider Noortje Marres' concept of the "experimental fact" as a means to evaluate claims coming from very different epistemological spaces (Marres, 2018).

Conservapedia

Unveiled to the world in 2006, Conservapedia was the brainchild of Andrew Schlafly. Educated at Harvard, Schlafly trained as an attorney, but appears to have made a career out of providing home schooling resources and tutorials. According to him, when his students followed the Wikipedia convention to date historical events as BCE (Before Common Era) rather than BC (Before Christ) in their assignments, he questioned why the Christian tradition was being ignored. He became concerned enough to try to create an alternative online encyclopaedia, using his students to kickstart the project by writing Conservapedia articles as part of their curriculum (Simon, 2007). However, while students using BCE rather than BC might have been the trigger for Schlafly to start Conservapedia it is clear that he was becoming frustrated with his own Wikipedia experience.

We know this because early in 2006, he tried to edit the Wikipedia article on the Kansas evolution hearings. Held in May 2005 these hearings before the state Board of Education debated how the origin of life should be taught in public schools. Schlafly's concern was over how those responsible for the hearings were portrayed in the article: "I object to saying that a campaign 'seeks to redefine science to allow for supernatural explanations, unless the proponents of that campaign describe it that way. This sounds like something that the critics would say'" (Kansas evolution hearings talk page, Archive 1, Edits, science and POV, Schlafly Jan. 10, 2006). In the following days he added to his criticism, but was not successful in getting his edits accepted, eventually accusing other editors of being vandals and violating Wikipedia's Neutral Point of View (NPOV) policy.

Schlafly's evocation of this policy is not surprising as Conservapedia is fundamentally a response to widespread confusion over NPOV among the Wikipedia community. Matei *et al.* have argued that "NPOV finds itself in a chronic process of ambiguity" as "its philosophical, ideological and moral assumptions are contested" so that the term has become a weapon "used to beat one's adversaries over the head and justify forcible impositions of meaning on specific topics" (Matei *et al.*, p. 48).

NPOV was introduced in 2001, shortly after Wikipedia got started, as a mechanism that would allow people with very divergent views to work together in a constructive manner. In its earliest formulation the policy instructed editors to write articles without taking an explicit stance on the truthfulness of any statement. It was in fact a writing style. Statements or claims were to be presented as beliefs held by authors.

But right from the beginning there was a lack of understanding about what NPOV was all about (Luyt, 2025). Some editors argued that the policy implied a proper hierarchy of knowledge, with scientific claims given precedence. Others saw the policy as requiring editors to achieve a kind of pure objectivity, beyond any one point of view, which they quite rightly thought to be an impossible task (the title, with its use of the word 'neutral,' encouraged this misunderstanding). Still others argued that Wikipedia needed to weigh the amount of space given to any point of view, according to what the wider expert community considered legitimate and less legitimate. But how to define this expert community? Most Wikipedians were not subject experts and often used only the most rudimentary sources to delineate mainstream from minority and what increasingly were labelled "fringe" views. This later focus was labelled undue weight" in the argot of Wikipedia and identifying and rooting it out became an obsessive point of contention between editors battling to keep Wikipedia based on science and free of pseudoscience and, to a lesser extent, religious dogma.

Adding to the confusion, in 2007 there was a radical re-interpretation of the policy (Luyt, 2025). Whereas previously, NPOV was seen not to be the absence of a POV, in other words, not an objective, God-like view of a topic, but rather a style of writing, the newest version of the

policy was to argue the opposite. The NPOV was a POV, one that was “neutral” in its take on the subject with neutrality expressed by a lack of both sympathy and antagonism towards the subject. Once again, Wikipedians underestimated the difficulty of doing so – who is to judge if there exists in any particular article a surplus of either sympathy or antagonism?

In tracing the history of the NPOV policy, it is clear that a general hardening of attitudes has taken place. Wikipedia has become a less welcoming place for those with differing perspectives to the point where one of its co-founders, Larry Sanger, has declared that it “has been transformed into a thuggish defender of epistemic prerogatives of the powerful . . . It is a mockery of an encyclopedia anybody can edit” (Sanger, 2020, p. 219). Sanger’s damning indictment is reinforced by a recent mixed methods study by Morris-O’Connor *et al.* that concluded “as long as only a singular ‘truth’ is seen as acceptably encyclopedic, the dominant narrative will remain a powerful force on WP. Current WP policy and expectations around editor interactions encourages editors to not engage in discussions or seek multiple voices and perspectives on Talk pages, instead rewarding those who remain rigid in their views and unaccepting of alternatives, compromises, or the existence of equal but different voices” (Morris-O’Connor *et al.*, 2023, p. 807). Matei *et al.* makes a similar observation, noting that some Wikipedia editors have “been redefining the concept of neutrality for themselves . . . which has led to a tendency of personally appropriating content via practices such as ‘patrolling’ entries and reverting massive editorial changes of other Wikipedians if they do not correspond with a subjectively defined standard of ‘neutrality’” (Matei and Dobrescu, 2011, p. 50).

While Sanger’s observation and Morris-O’Connor’s study date to the time when the phenomenon of hardening was becoming more pronounced and harder to ignore, the idea of a separate online encyclopedia espousing the conservative point of view, one able to occupy a distinct epistemological space of its own, would have been an attractive proposition to at least some individuals much earlier. The collapse of a more tolerant vision of NPOV has merely made this almost inevitable. As Jens-Erik Mai notes, notions that NPOV is meant to ensure an epistemological homogeneity open up “a challenge to the continuing status of Wikipedia as a cognitive authority” (Mai, 2016, p. 16). Similarly, in a study of the evolution of Wikipedia’s core norms, including neutrality, Bradi Heaberlin and Simon DeDeo note that a small group of early editors had a disproportionate influence on the resulting normative framework, forging them in ways “that meet their own needs, but not the needs of those who arrive later” (Heaberlin and DeDeo, 2016, p. 11).

The irony, of course, is that once in possession of their epistemological space, the early editors of Conservapedia proceeded, like many other revolutions before them, to become as intolerant of different opinions as the regime they criticized and broke away from. The senior editors of Conservapedia engaged in a great deal of account blocking and curbing of viewpoints contrary to their own, resulting in a relatively inactive editor community.

This was not the case initially. Conservapedia flourished in its early years, with active readers and writers numbering in the thousands in mid-2007, with the site receiving up to 12.3 million page views. Today, however, Conservapedia’s vitality, as measured by participation, as opposed to readership alone, is vastly inferior, not just relative to Wikipedia, but in “absolute” terms as well. In April 2024, for example, the site’s statistics page recorded 75,634 registered users, but in the past month only thirty-one of those users made an edit. The number for August 2024 was even lower – a grand total of twenty-one (Conservapedia statistics page).

Nevertheless, it would be misguided to dismiss or ridicule Conservapedia, although it is easy enough to do so (see, for example, the older pages of RationalWiki). de Keulenaar *et al.* (2019), make the important point that alternative encyclopedias provide a demonstration of Lyotard’s belief that digital computing would result in the breakdown of universal schemes of knowledge due to the technology’s plasticity, a characteristic which enables the frequent and rapid rearrangement of complex information. For de Keulenaar *et al.*, altpedias such as Conservapedia and their own case study of Metapedia, are “epistemic refuges” for the knowledge rejected by Wikipedia. From this perspective, Wikipedia is “essentially a liberal technology of epistemological power” that “mollifies ideological dissent by subjecting knowledge to the liberal principles of consensus and neutrality [1].”

Furthermore, despite being “frozen” in terms of participation, Conservapedia now reflects a consensus of sorts among a sector of Americans (and likely others around the world) for whom it serves as a source of information. It also stands ready to be mobilized as a weapon in future knowledge wars. After the 2016 US election, communication scholar, Jonathan Albright, set to work creating an “extensive map of the entire right-wing news ecosystem” using network analysis. The result was a series of graphs of what he concluded was “arguably the most powerful propaganda machine in the history of US election politics” (Albright 2016). For our purposes, the important point to note here is that despite its rather moribund status as an editing community, Conservapedia is a central component in this network. Alongside Rense.com, Conservapedia stands out as a key connecting site linking right wing news sites to each other. In other words, it performs an important mediating role within the alt right world [2].

As a result, for those concerned about political polarization in the world today, it would be unwise to ignore efforts such as Conservapedia to develop separate universes of knowledge. The first step in developing such an awareness is to understand something of the ideology that structures its operation. Three documents are especially useful in this task: the “Conservapedia Commandments”, “How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia” and “Conservapedia Guidelines.” Together, these three documents and their talk pages act as signposts to what the controllers of Conservapedia feel are important problems that need to be addressed; and the fundamental principles behind their work. These points will be dealt with in the following sections.

Problems

Supporters and long-time editors of Conservapedia see Wikipedia as an important but deeply flawed institution, one in need of reform. Hence much about Conservapedia is a reaction to Wikipedia as evidenced by the existence of the long-standing page, “How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia.”

From the perspective of Conservapedia’s founders, Wikipedia has blocked efforts to represent their own world view(s) and in so doing denied them a voice. As a result, the online encyclopedia that claims to represent all the world’s knowledge has demonstrated (to the Conservapedia community, if not to others), that it is fundamentally closed-minded, that is, instead of embracing a variety of perspectives on an issue it demands adherence to what Conservapedia monolithically calls the “liberal” point of view. To those persuaded of this claim, this is unfair as it results in “Wikipedia editors who are far more liberal than the American public” censoring “factual information” (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia page).

But there is more wrong in Wikipedia than just its censorious behaviour. For the Conservapedia community, Wikipedia exhibits what may be described as a certain wooliness of thought that compounds the problem of its insistence on asserting the “liberal point of view.” This wooliness is reflected in “long-winded, verbose entries, making it difficult to recognize the essential facts” and allowance for the “opinion of journalists to be repeated here [ie. on Wikipedia] as though they are facts” (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia page). Wikipedia is, in fact, “part of the hearsay society” (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia page). Wooliness is also reflected in overly loose or euphemistic definitions of terms were, for example, “terrorists” are referred to as “militants” (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia page) and a topic is seen as “controversial” rather than “criticized.” (Conservapedia Guidelines (Style). More innocently, it is demonstrated in Wikipedia’s naming conventions which allow for monikers such as “Nearly Headless Nick” and “The Ostrich”, reflecting a lack of intellectual rigour (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia page).

Wikipedia’s “muddled” thinking and liberal “bias” may perhaps be explained by a further problem – it is not focused on the job at hand; namely, to create a reliable online encyclopedia. Rather it has been side-tracked (captured?) by a quest to use “its traffic to attract million-dollar

investments in money-making projects, such as building a search engine” (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia page). Of course at the time this accusation was levelled, this was not the case. Wikipedia didn’t establish a close relationship with Google till around 2012, after the failure of its own online encyclopedia project, Knol.

Finally, Conservapedia makes it perfectly plain that they see Wikipedia as part of a wider “permissive society” that exposes youth to words and images that they are not ready to read and see. Not given to mincing words here, Wikipedia, according to Conservapedia, allows “obscenity” and includes “pornographic images, without meaningful warning” on a medium that is available to all ages (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia page).

Principles

Faced with these problems in what they originally thought would be a welcoming epistemological space, the founders of Conservapedia suggest a number of principles that they feel are necessary for the creation of an online encyclopedia that reflects their own worldview and mindset.

Open-mindedness is supposedly a foundation stone. In the guide’s discussion of tolerance, Conservapedia is claimed to “not [be] afraid of describing ideas we don’t believe in” and that “If you’ll follow our editorial guidelines, then there’s no idea off limits” (Conservapedia Guidelines: tolerance).

While Conservapedia wants to be seen as open-minded, it certainly does have limits. “Extreme positions or radical points of view” are not countenanced (Conservapedia Guidelines: reliability). The guide is clear too that, fundamentally, Conservapedia “is a politically conservative, Christian encyclopedia project (Conservapedia Guidelines: Member accounts). This is reflected most clearly in the Commandments page where we are instructed that ‘BCE’ and ‘CE’ are unacceptable substitutes because they deny the historical basis [of the birth of Jesus]” (Conservapedia Commandments #4). Blasphemy is another taboo, for which at least in one case an editor was banned for three days (Conservapedia Commandments talk, Archive 4, Suggestions, Bugler June 14, 2008).

Facts, however, are “supposedly” sacrosanct on Conservapedia. Editors are told “not to post personal opinions on an encyclopedia entry” and “advertisements are prohibited” (Conservapedia Commandments #5). On this point, Conservapedia hopes to distinguish itself from Wikipedia’s “hearsay society” by separating the “wheat from the chaff” so that a distinction is made between “what is factual and what is unreliable” (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia page). However, the definition of a “fact” is rather selective. The site’s founder, summing up a debate on Conservapedia’s point of view, wrote that “the name Conservapedia simply means that we are free of liberal bias and anti-conservative bias” which seems unremarkable enough, but it is followed by the claim that “Conservative information is truthful. Our slogan (from the Gospels), ‘the truth shall set you free’ is clear enough” (Conservapedia Commandments talk page Archive 4, Amendment recommendations, Aschlaflly, Oct. 22, 2008).

In this regard, Conservapedia editors take issue with Wikipedia’s key NPOV policy. This opposition to what the founders of Wikipedia considered an essential means to get holders of disparate views to work amicably together is made clear in Conservapedia’s discussion of the notion of reliability. Here reliability is seen as a legitimate epistemological objective, but that “bias” can hamper its development and that “neutrality may not be an antidote” (Conservapedia Guidelines: reliability). What the editors of Conservapedia mean is that a spade needs to be called a spade and more importantly, that it should be clear to all intelligent people that a spade is a spade and not another closely related tool. Like many others, the founders of Conservapedia think of information or knowledge in positivist terms. There is no room in this epistemological universe for relativism. Facts exist and can be found like butterflies in a field, or gemstones in a mine, there for the taking. But to be fair, many Wikipedia editors have similar views.

If NPOV is scorned, Wikipedia's other key policy, the verification of claims by citation to reliable sources is apparently not: "Always cite and give credit to your sources" and "sources should be authoritative works, not merely published opinions by others, even if in the public domain" (Conservapedia Commandment #2).

Respect for editors is another principle that Conservapedia enshrines in these foundational documents. It declares that compared to Wikipedia, with its "burdensome copyright restrictions" (presumably referring to Wikipedia's use of Creative Commons licensing), "we at Conservapedia allow broader reuse of our material" (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia) and that "we respect users' control over their own talk pages as much as possible" (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia). Respect for editors intertwines with open-mindedness. For Conservapedia "your user pages, user talk, and user space are indeed your castle, from which you can agree, disagree, and discuss issues as you will" (Conservapedia Guidelines: User pages and user space).

From respect for editors, flows attention to creating an "intellectual" atmosphere. Editors should see themselves as engaged in "intellectual" work. Conservapedia proudly advertises that it has space for original essays and has special pages open for debate. Experts are supposedly given priority over other run of the mill editors and bureaucracy is to be kept to a minimum: "We do not require contributing editors to have to explain themselves constantly and justify every single edit to prove that it conforms to an exacting set of rules which are designed to suppress original thought, new ideas and penetrating insight" (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia). Intellectualism is also bound up with a certain standard of behaviour: "There is a difference between intellectual discourse, and attacking someone for what they believe" (Conservapedia Guidelines: Civility).

However, it is a very particular kind of intellectualism that is held up for emulation here, an intellectualism that takes itself very seriously and in which there is little place for play; much like the puritans of old, seriousness of purpose is demanded. In this regard, it is telling that Andrew Schlafly frequently employs the adjective "silly" to describe features that he deems not worthy of an encyclopedia (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia talk page, numbers 1,2,3,5,8,9, Aschlaflly, August 30, 2007; How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia talk page, Stubs, Aschlaflly April 9, 2007). Already mentioned have been the strictures against "frivolous" usernames. One of these was "The Ostrich" which elicited a question about why such a name was "anti-intellectual." In the ensuing discussion Schlafly responded "that an ostrich hides his head in the sand. That has anti-intellectual connotations. Try applying for a graduate program by saying how much you'd like to be an ostrich and then let us know [how] much that impresses the professors" (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia talk page, #16 – "anti-intellectual", Aschlaflly, May 14, 2007).

Adopting this kind of intellectual identity was likely a strategic choice. Conservapedia found itself needing to justify its split from Wikipedia and under "attack" by Wikipedians, many of whom derided the idea of a conservative Christian encyclopedia. Wider society too was sceptical. In fact, an entirely new wiki project, RationalWiki, got its start as a community around which critics of Conservapedia could gather, and which "by their own admission" engaged in "acts of cyber-vandalism" including inserting pornographic photos and satiric text in Conservapedia articles (Simon, 2007).

The Conservapedia talk pages also provide examples of behaviour that could be construed as attacks and sabotage. Consider the creation of a template warning that "... editing with a factual bias grounded in reality is counter to the principles of Conservapedia, and if you continue to do so you may be blocked from editing for a period of time, or banned" (Conservapedia Commandments talk page, Archive 3, Rule against templates, TerryK April 4, 2007).

Furthermore, some editors on the site made no secret of the fact that they were not committed to the project. In one exchange, Charliemc86 considered "the very existence of Conservapedia" to be "a joke" to which another editor, Sid 3050, replied "... I agree with you, but I still think that it may have a chance of becoming a bit ... more accepted (as more than a

source of endless entertainment at least” (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia talk page, Original research, Sid 3050, March 21, 2007). IMFromKathlene provides another example. Discussing whether or to what extent Conservapedia should allow editors to copy from Wikipedia, Dpbsmith noted that Wikipedia was “perfectly cool with the idea of a ‘Wikipedia fork’ that is starting with Wikipedia and changing it . . . e.g. removing content that’s inappropriate for children, correcting bias . . .” to which she sarcastically retorted: “You know, basically doing what all of you could be doing at Wikipedia if you didn’t prefer secession over improvement” (Conservapedia Commandments talk page, Archive 3, Plagiarism/Copying from Wikipedia, IMFromKathlene, March 23, 2007).

In such a situation it was not surprising that a kind of siege mentality would develop. It was “us” versus the “world.” As Karajou explained in his decision to block an editor, “The reason for removal are simple: there are individuals here who have brought their liberal-leaning bias with them from Wikipedia, and the intent is sabotage” (Conservapedia Commandments talk page, Archive 3, Bible, Karajou March 11, 2007). Describing trolls and trolling behaviour the guide tells us that although many are just “attention seekers” some “have a direct purpose or agenda – to destroy the Conservapedia project and limit its ability to build an Internet community” (Conservapedia Guidelines: inappropriate behaviour). The Commandment talk page also provides evidence of this perceived need to protect Conservapedia among some editors, in this case leading to the idea that certain sources of information might need to be banned because they “attack conservative values in general or Conservapedia in particular” (Conservapedia Commandments talk page, Archive 4, Please list banned sites, Benp July 9, 2008).

A law-and-order mindset

However, the focus on creating an image of intellectual seriousness on Conservapedia reflects not only a reaction to external criticism, but points to the value that its dominant editors place on what we might refer to as a law-and-order mentality. The clearest example of this is to be found at the bottom of the Commandments page where the reader is informed that: “Posting of obscenity here is punishable by up to 10 years in jail under 18 USC 1470. Vandalism is punishable by up to 10 years in jail per 18 USC 1030. Harassment is punished by 2 years in jail per 47 USC 223. The IP addresses of vandals will be reported to authorities. That includes your employer and your local prosecutor” (Conservapedia Commandments page).

In the talk pages a number of editors pointed out that it would be difficult to prosecute vandalism on the site in the courts for a variety of reasons. Summing up the discussion was Niwrad, who wrote that “To think that you could provide my IP address to my local prosecutor (snicker) AND expect them to do something about hurting your feelings or violating some internal code is actually very amusing. You are far more likely to have my prosecutor . . . call you and ask you to stop harassing them” (Conservapedia Commandments talk page, Archives 3, My prosecutor, Niwrad, March 17, 2007). But the threat of legal action is still on the page as of this writing and the response to Niwrad is quite telling: “. . . this is not harassment, it is law enforcement” (Conservapedia Commandments talk page, Archives 3, My prosecutor, Geo, March 17, 2007).

Another example of this “law and order” mentality revolves around the perceived need for “efficiency” and a desire not to waste time. Consider the seventh commandment: “Conservapedia encourages editors to contribute to our encyclopedia articles, essays and debates. Unproductive activity, such as disparagement of other legitimate editors, other belligerent bullying and trolling is prohibited. 90% unproductive edits and only 10% quality edits to Conservapedia articles, essays and debates, may result in blocking of an account” (Conservapedia Commandment #7).

There are a number of striking things about the commandment. The first is that it was to be applied to debate pages as well as the pages of the encyclopedia itself. And the second is that it tried to quantify what is difficult to put into numbers. What exactly is an unproductive edit or

comment? Much like the quoting of law codes to combat vandalism, other Conservapedia editors took issue with this commandment. Sid noted that “it’s nearly impossible to calculate a halfway ratio” (Conservapedia Commandments talk page, Archive 3, The 90/10 rule, Sid, April 13, 2007) and that it would be difficult to decide what counts as an inferior edit. Would it be “copyediting” or “fixing a dead-end page” or “discussing policy”? (Conservapedia Commandments talk page, Archive 3, The 90/10 rule, Sid, April 13, 2007). Horace declared the rule “wrong and should be removed” because “it just doesn’t make sense” and was “muddleheaded” leading to “people [editing] without discussion beforehand which is highly undesirable” (Commandments talk page, Archive 3, The 90/10 rule, Horace, April 12, 2007). CPAdmin “observed that much of the productive work is done on talk pages” and that the rule “was an excuse to block users that disagree” but in his opinion these users “are important” because “they keep us honest” (Commandments talk page, Archive 3, The 90/10 rule, CPAdmin, April 15, 2007). Akjeldsen suggested that in publishing, “the discussions about the project usually heavily outweighs the actual finished product” because “whenever something is done collaboratively, by a team, good and frequent communications between the participants is absolutely essential” (Commandments talk page, Archive 3, The 90/10 rule, CPAdmin, April 16, 2007). It is telling that Aschlaflly’s response to criticism of the 90/10 rule was to stress the need for efficiency: “I don’t want Conservapedia to lose a productive editor because he’s being constantly irritated by an unproductive one” (Commandments talk page, Archive 3, The 90/10 rule, Aschlaflly, April 15, 2007). He reinforced this point, writing that “... we do have to build an encyclopedia here, and talk is not advancing that goal” (Commandments talk page, Archive 3, The 90/10 rule, Aschlaflly, April 15, 2007). The seventh commandment remains in place today.

Implications

Conservapedia has failed to expand in the same manner as Wikipedia. At the beginning of this article, I noted its nearly frozen status – few editors and consequently little editing activity. It could be argued that Conservapedia’s seventh commandment was partially responsible for this state of affairs, but at a deeper level, it is only a symptom of a deeper malaise – the law-and-order mindset of the dominant editors. Concerned only with the “efficient” creation of text they were unwilling or unable to understand that conservatism, like the liberalism they despised, was not monolithic, but rather composed of multiple positionalities and strands of thought. Only dialogue and negotiation could have created a more vibrant community capable of rapid and vigorous expansion.

The talk pages provide a great deal of evidence of this clash of conservatisms. Consider Conservapedia’s stated intent of being a family-friendly encyclopedia and the bewilderment of editors wondering why it could not follow Encyclopedia Britannica’s example and have an overview article on sexual intercourse. O2mcgovem asked: “What’s wrong with a scientific article on something completely natural, something which is very much involved with Christianity?” (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia talk page, Neutral? Censorship? O2mcgovem, March 1, 2007). Commenting on the post, a second editor agreed, thinking Conservapedia’s position “odd” and clarifying that “there is no need to get into the depth that Wikipedia goes into about human sexuality [sic], sex positions, etc. But some acknowledgment or treatment of the way that nearly all multi-cellular organisms come to be seems to be something that should be included in anything claiming to be ‘encyclopedic’” (How Conservapedia differs from Wikipedia talk page, Zerba, March 22, 2007).

Moving from the topic of sexuality we can consider a 2008 post querying the use of references to the Bible on Conservapedia. For user Qc “while faith is fine, a lot of the Bible is unverified”. Despite holding these views Qc was quick to point out that the views (and by extension people expressing them) were not making “an anti-Christian statement . . . just not pro-Christian” (Commandments talk, Archive 4, Qc, March 17, 2008). Here we have an example of a Conservapedia editor who identified with the aims of creating an online

encyclopedia from a conservative point of view, but who was not necessarily a believer in fundamentalist Christianity.

Consider also a comment made by an anonymous user suggesting that another commandment identifying and prohibiting “conservative bias,” that is, “assuming as fact what conservatives popularly say – is no substitute for documenting facts which liberals are known to challenge, any more than liberal bias is a substitute for evidence. This is not called Conservapedia because it censors liberals and gives conservatives a pass, but because it will not be censored just because they are conservative, and because it is a particularly conservative value that facts and conclusions justified by them are welcome, no matter who likes them” (Conservapedia Commandments talk page (current), Suggested new commandment, no date).

This appeal to a rational conservatism is profitability contrasted to another dialogue, this time concerning the need to prohibit hate speech on Conservapedia in light of one user being blocked “for implying the mass killing of homosexuals.” RightWolf2 countered that “preaching God’s word is not hate speech. Only homosexuals believe so. It’s part of their agenda” (Conservapedia Commandments talk page, Archive 3, Hate Speech, RightWolf2, March 21, 2007). Other editors continued in a more moderate tone, suggesting that a dictionary definition of bigotry be used or alternatively definitions of the term used in the US legal system, but RightWolf2 resisted vehemently: “People committing sodomy are not in a protected class” (Conservapedia Commandments talk page, Archive 3, Hate Speech, RightWolf2, March 21, 2007). Once again, the reader sees moderate conservative voices juxtaposed with extreme views.

Where does all this leave us, in terms of understanding Conservapedia and the wider right and alt-right world in which it plays such a key role as online information mediator? At the time of writing Conservapedia’s main page prominently features links to what it refers to as “what the MSM isn’t fully covering,” among which one can find the following headlines: “More bad news for Deep State: Trump vows to release Jeffrey Epstein’s full client list”; “Ukraine Nazis bomb Church in Belgorod”; “Zelensky, Soros threaten Mongolia for welcoming their honored guest, President Vladimir Putin”; “Tampon Tim’s brother: ‘Not the type of character you want in high office’” and “Will you go to hell for me? The Democratic Party is a death machine” (Conservapedia main page, In the news: what the MSM isn’t fully covering, https://www.conservapedia.com/Main_Page, accessed September 6, 2024).

Reading these headlines, it is clear that this is an entirely different epistemological world from the one many intellectuals are likely to encounter. It is made even more disconcerting by the absence of any link or juxtaposition between this world and the so-called mainstream media (MSM). It is an example of a homophily producing mechanism.

Bar-On (2021), writing of the so-called “culture wars” in Europe and North America forcefully argues that they need to be taken seriously by intellectuals and scholars. For Bar-On, the alt-right has among its leadership a subset who are “intellectually and philosophically sophisticated” in so far as they “understand the crucial role of culture in destabilizing liberal society . . .” (Bar-on 2021, p. 64). In his view, these leaders see themselves as a kind of Leninist vanguard, following a Gramscian-inspired strategy to win “hearts and minds” with the aim of extending and solidifying political power in their societies.

Antonio Gramsci was an influential leader in the Italian Communist party of the 1920s and 1930s. Arrested by Mussolini for his anti-fascist views, he died in prison in 1937. However, his ideas survived in the form of what have come to be called his “Prison Notebooks.” In these notebooks Gramsci developed a number of important concepts, perhaps the most important of which was hegemony. In his view, rulers could not rule for extended periods of time without the tacit consent of the ruled. This did not negate the fact that exploitation took place. It did. But to be successful, rulers needed to go at least some way to identify with, both rhetorically and concretely, the interests of the ruled. Hegemony did not preclude coercion of various forms, but the use of force on other than a small scale was a sign that it had broken down so that the raw realities of the linkage between political and economic power were exposed for all to see.

For Bar-On then, the far or alt-right are engaged in a long-term project of trying to build a workable hegemony that would allow them to become the dominant political force in Europe and North America, capable of implementing their plans for what he describes as the construction of “ethno-states” (Bar-On, 2021, p. 66).

Other scholars studying the alt right have come to different conclusions. Eliah Bures argues that although intellectuals of the right increasingly declare themselves to be engaged in Gramscian political work, they are not. If they truly were doing so, they would be involved more in “good faith consensus building” (Bures, 2023). For Bures, the work of James Hunter (1991) provides a better guide to the right-wing cultural project. According to Bures, Hunter sees the right as a community of “knowledge workers wielding an arsenal of polarizing rhetorical weapons” (9) in a quest to develop a “discourse of adversaries” (Bures, 2023, p. 13). These far-right knowledge workers include “lobbyists, lawyers, freelance writers, journalists, editors, publicists, community organizers, media personalities, movement activists, religious leaders, policy specialists at think tanks and managers of social and political organizations” (Bures, 2023, p. 15). The list should also include the editors and founders of online encyclopedias.

Viewing Conservapedia as a narrow attempt of right-wing knowledge workers to create a rhetorical machine capable of presenting an appropriate epistemological position explains much of the gap between the declared open-mindedness of Conservapedia and its obsession with efficiency and the tensions with conservative non-conformists. Conservapedia is less about building consensus than about creating a database of dogma for the far right. Such a database is a central weapon in the “culture wars” to redefine reality, as Albright has demonstrated in his network graphs.

For those fearful of the long-term consequences of the rise of the far-right, or more widely, those who fear the growing unwillingness of people to speak civilly across political and ideological divides, Conservapedia is a troubling phenomenon. But so too is the hardening of Wikipedia attitudes towards dissent. While the far-right may not really be engaged in Gramscian hegemony-building projects, their rhetorical nod to the importance of such a task suggests that those opposed to their polarizing activities should make that task their own. This does not mean that all claims need to be accepted at face value, but rather that they all be seen as expressing, in an indirect way, certain deeper truths about society that in could be used to create bonds of commonality or agreement. In this regard, Noortje Marres’ concept of the “experimental fact” is useful. For Marres such a fact does not need to be empirically true for it to be of value. All claims are valuable for what they say about the life experiences of those promulgating them. She provides the “Brexit bus” as an example of a completely false claim (that Brexit would allow for extra funding to the NHS) that nevertheless sheds light on the immense value people in the UK have for public services, which can serve in turn for political alliance building (Marres, 2018). In a sense the concept of “experimental fact” represents a kind of dialectical synthesis between the shortcomings of both the hardening attitudes of Wikipedia and Conservapedia with its dogmatic assertion of a certain brand of conservatism. Developing an appreciation of the need to see below the surface level of claims could encourage tolerance and open mindedness among editors that in turn might lead to a damping down of the polarization that has resulted in the fracturing of the Wikipedia project that once was billed as a place for “all the world’s knowledge”.

Conclusion

In this article, I have outlined the objections Conservapedia’s founding editors had to Wikipedia and their own stated principles of operation. I have also demonstrated that Conservapedia as a community tends to espouse a law-and-order mindset that puts off potential contributors, even those with an ostensible conservative worldview so that an examination of Conservapedia gives support to the more general notion that the alt-right is not engaging, or least succeeding, in developing a hegemonic presence.

This is not to say that phenomena such as Conservapedia can safely be ignored. As a database of dogma, it is an important node in the right-wight information ecosystem that needs to be challenged. Bar-On concludes his own analysis of the far right with a call to “create a ‘new New Left’” by which he means that more attention needs to be paid to Gramsci’s political thought by “building think tanks, crafting new manifestos, devoting ceaseless energies to the cultural realm and taking the Internet by storm . . .” (Bar-On, 2021, p. 66). To this needs to be added the creation of truly diverse and open-minded online encyclopedias. This is a project that information workers should support.

Notes

1. However, I am not so sure that the Conservapedia split was inevitable. The history of misunderstanding over what NPOV was and the hardening of positions over divergent views suggest that the initial “liberal principles” could have warded off a separation, especially if Wikipedia had adopted a policy of allowing more than one page per topic. Unfortunately, this was seen as a step too far from the traditional notion of how an encyclopedia should be structured. The creation of Conservapedia and its survival should perhaps be seen more as a reflection of the weakening of initial liberal norms that held Wikipedia together than an inevitable byproduct of those norms.
2. Rense.com streams Jeff Rense’s talk show, initially part of the talk-radio universe in the United States. Moving to the Internet was necessary as radio networks refused to broadcast it in the 1990s after it was accused of promoting hate speech. It regularly highlights conspiracy theories and other alt right-wing discourse.

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